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INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000977

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PREF SOCI PREL IZ JO

SUBJECT: IRAQI REFUGEES IN JORDAN TALK REPATRIATION -
EVENTUALLY, BUT NOT NOW

REF: BAGHDAD 286

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Embassy officers attended a focus group of Iraqi refugees in Jordan organized by an international NGO on the topic of repatriation. The Iraqis acknowledged that security in Iraq was improving, and most expressed the desire to return to Iraq in the future. However, attendees unanimously commented that the overall situation in Iraq had not yet improved sufficiently to justify their return, none were currently planning to repatriate, and some hoped instead to stay in Jordan long-term or to be resettled in a third country. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The organizing NGO, International Relief and Development, handles community outreach in a project funded by UNHCR and the USG. At RefCoord's request, the organization's director organized in March a focus group of 15 Iraqi volunteers to discuss repatriation. Participants were selected for their knowledge of the issue and to ensure representation of key demographics including gender and minority groups. The Iraqi attendees described themselves as very well informed about the current environment in Iraq, citing frequent phone calls with friends and family still in the country as their primary source of information.

¶3. (C) While many of the Iraqi participants noted that security in Iraq was improving, even more agreed that instability was still too high to return. Nearly all had stories of recent killings, kidnappings, or other instability that informed their concerns (one particularly insidious report featured two refugees killed upon returning from Syria). Fears of continued insecurity ran sufficiently high that when asked whether they would consider returning to Iraq on a temporary basis--to visit friends and family or to check the situation for themselves--many said no. Asked about those Iraqis who had returned from Jordan, attendees portrayed them as those with little choice, having run out of funds to sustain themselves abroad.

¶4. (C) The Iraq attendees doubted the Iraqi Government's ability to manage security. One woman asserted that most Iraqi Government officials lived in the International Zone and kept their own families abroad in places such as Amman, Dubai, and London. Others added that the U.S. was not positioned to guarantee security either: one noted that even U.S. soldiers were not safe in Iraq, and another said the more U.S. forces withdraw, the more those remaining will focus on protecting their own interests.

¶5. (C) Security fears loomed even larger for those with children. Asked whether they would be more likely to return home if the Iraqi Government better supported returnees, one woman offered that when it came to her children such "ifs" were insufficient. Rather she was looking for concrete guarantees that Iraq would be safe, stable and livable.

Another woman asserted that for her children's sake, she hoped to be resettled in a third country. Representatives of minority populations also expressed heightened concerns about security. A Mandaean woman noted that she knows no one from her community who plans to return. A Christian Iraqi woman claimed it was still incredibly unsafe for Christians everywhere in Iraq, except perhaps part of the north.

¶6. (SBU) While continued insecurity featured as the single greatest impediment to return, the attendees noted that even with security, additional barriers to their repatriation remained. One Iraqi man said, after security, his primary concern was the weakness of public services, which suffered in comparison to Amman. Another told of a returnee who died in childbirth due to poor health services. Several women spoke of the lack of employment prospects in Iraq for themselves and for their husbands, noting in specific cases how few jobs there were in skilled areas like media or art.

¶7. (C) The Iraqi attendees were divided about whether their government wanted them to return. Most believed yes, if only because they thought the Iraqi Government wanted skilled people to return and help rebuild the country or because supporting refugee returns helped build international public opinion. One woman, who was the wife of a former Iraqi army officer, noted that she expected the threat against close affiliates of the former regime would remain prohibitively high. Another attendee stated that Iraqis who fought against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war were particularly unwelcome in the new Iraq. The most pessimistic view of the Iraqi Government's intentions came from a woman who said the government wanted her to return, but only to slaughter her.

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She further alleged that the government kept a list of refugees to kill upon their return.

¶8. (C) For those not planning to return home, resettlement to a third country appeared the desired option. Attendees, however, noted that the U.S. was not a preferred destination for resettlement. They commented that the U.S. was expensive and culturally very different from Iraq. The Iraqis also characterized American resettlement assistance as often inferior--both in scope and duration--to that provided by alternate, generally European, countries. Even while criticizing U.S. resettlement support, attendees reiterated their gratitude for U.S. financial support while in Jordan.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: The comments by Iraqi attendees track with and add detail to the UNHCR registration information and NGO polling cited in reftel. Their remarks suggested that a comprehensive assessment of long-term living conditions in Iraq is the key driver of their decision about whether to return or not. Despite improvements in security, participants viewed the whole picture as dark and unstable.
End Comment.

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Beecroft